THE FARMER CAN DO IT IF HE WILL.

(Written Specially for The Bulletin)

A friend who is traveling in Europe sent me, the other day, a copy of The New York Herald's Paris edition. From it I clipped the following text of Franco-American wisdom:

"The man with the hoe has his little troubles, but he doesn't have to fork over 12 francs for 80 sous worth of vegetables."

This seems to indicate that markets and market prices are much of a muchness, whether in America or in Europe. Also, that profiteers are of about the same complexion of soul on both sides the big water.

The paragraph has suggested to me two thoughts about two quite distinct phases of the price situation.

One is regarding that word "worth" in the quotation. The writer assumes that the non-farmer pays "12 francs for 80 sous worth of vegetables." Now it goes without saying that, if the non-farmer pays twelve francs, it is because the vegetables are worth twelve francs to him. They are, or he thinks they are. Otherwise, he would keep his twelve francs and go without the vegetables. Why, then start off with any assumption that they are really "worth' 80 sous? That may, indeed, be what the farmer gets, but isn't it quite as possible that he gets less than they are "worth?" Isn't this assumption quite as natural as the other, viz: that the consumer pays more than they are "worth?"

Standing on this side of the stump and considering it in the light which falls on it from the direction of the farms, let's put the thing the other way round and see how it reads. For instance:

"The man with the hoe has his little troubles, chief among them being that he can get only 80 sous for 12 francs worth of vegetables."

You are kindly invited to observe that this way of stating it is just as good English, quite as truthful, and exactly as logical as the other.

If, as we have seen, the buying consumer thinks the vegetables in question "worth" 12 francs to him, why aren't they "worth" 12 francs to the producing farmer?

As Alkali Ike says, "How come?" How comes it that the carrots and cabbages which are "worth" 12 francs at noon on the city counter were "worth" only 80 sous that same morning on the farmer's wagon?

What constitutes worth, anyway? By what is it measured? To the consumer, these vegetables are worth 12 francs, or he wouldn't pay that sum for them. To the farmer, they are worth but 80 sous, or he wouldn't take that sum for them. He isn't compelled to sell, any more than the other fellow is compelled to buy. The farmer wouldn't take his 80 sous unless he had rather have them, all things considered, than the carrots and cabbages. The consumer wouldn't pay 12 francs a few hours later unless, all things considered, he had rather have them than the 12 francs. What, then, are they really worth?

This seems to be another case where carelessness in the use of words confuses popular ideas. If two people use the same word, but each one attaches a somewhat different meaning to it, misunderstanding is natural, almost inevitable. Bitter quarrels have raged for no better reason than a different in definitions. Men have been martyred for no better reason than a dispute over the meaning of words. Wars have been fought because great governments disagreed as to the exact purport of treaty stipulations.

Take this word "worth." Webster gives two definitions, with no less than a dozen shade of difference set forth. He also gives five words as synonyms, viz: Desert, merit, excellence, price, rate. Yet it is used in our text with a meaning essentially different from that conveyed by any one of these so-called synonyms. It is used in a sense which makes it equally descriptive of an 80 sous price at 4 a. m. and of a 12 francs price at 10 a. m.

It comes close to this, that, when we talk of worth as meaning a thing's selling value, we find it largely dependent on circumstances and conditions. It isn't inherent and fixed, but floating and variable. These carrots and cabbages were manifestly worth less to the city consumer at the farm whereon they grew, than they were on his kitchen table in town. In the first case they were really worth nothing to him, for they were out of his reach. It added to their actual worth to him, that some one should bring them in and put them within his reach. And that service, of course he owed for just as truly as he owed for the carrots and cabbages themselves.

Therefore, as a simple matter of fact, it isn't quite true that those vegetables were "worth" either 12 francs or 80 sous. They were really "worth" some intermediate price between the two. The consumer paid a good deal more than this moral "worth" while the producing farmer got a good deal less. Both were mulcted of their fair dues by the smooth-talking, quick-fingered, middleman who stood between them and profiteered off both.

If you are not familiar with French money, perhaps I should have explained, before this, that a franc is equal, under normal conditions of exchange, to about twenty cents, and that it takes twenty sous to make a franc. So I'll do it now. Better late than never.

There was a second thought suggested to me by that comment. The man with the hoe doesn't have to pay for his daily vegetables anything like what the city consumer has to pay for a like supply. Even on the ratio assumed by this Paris quotation, they stand him in only one-third as much. He can sell them for 80 sous, to be sure. Or he can consume them at home and hug himself while reflecting that he's getting just as good a dinner at a net cost of 80 sous as his city neighbor has to pay 12 francs for.

Right there, it seems to me, is one of the great advantages which a farm life offers. It is a wonder that this advantage isn't more universally appreciated and more generally availed of.

When my grandfather's grandfather broke over the hills to the eastward and took up a farm in this valley, he brought with him a certain amount of supplies, enough to last only till he should have established himself and his big family on a self-supporting basis. And it wasn't a year before that farm of his was supplying that family with practically all its needs. Its field were growing all the potatoes and corn and wheat and oats and barley and buckwheat and hay and garden vegetables for which farm needs call. Its pastures fed the cattle, the horses, the sheep and the swine which were needed for meat, or for service, or for milk, butter and cheese. Its woods furnished timber and fuel and in the spring, an adequate supply of maple sugar or syrup. And so on, and so on.

To which you succinctly if somewhat slangily retort, 'O, yes, but them days is gone forever!"

And I counter with a pointed, "Who told you so?"

Some of the crudities and also some of the opportunities of those days, may indeed, be gone forever. But, with the change in tools and machines from the crude to the capable have come even greater opportunities, such as the old veterans never dreamed of as possible. What man has done man can do. To say that much is merely to parrot a trite truism. It is nearer the truth to say that what man did a hundred and fifty years ago, man today can beat all hollow—if he has only as much energy and gumption as his forbears. The farms which supported old-fashioned families of a dozen or twenty, five generations back, can certainly support modern families of three or four today. Support them just as completely and as adequately. It's all a matter of the will to do it.

The farmer—even the New England farmer on his few and thin-soiled acres—can, if he puts his mind and body both to the task, declare and maintain his own independence of trusts and market-fixers and profiteers. His ancestors did it because they had to. They would have starved if they hadn't. He can do it, if he thinks it worth while and will take the trouble.

Certainly, so far as the ordinary farm and garden products are concerned, so far as cow and horse and pig and chicken feed and cereal or vegetable supplies go, he can raise on his own farm, a large part of what farm consumption calls for. He can raise a much larger part than he does. If he were pushed to the wall by a stern necessity, such as confronted his ancestors, he would do it, as they did. If too hard pressed by market injustice and profiteering speculation, today, he can still do it.

And why in the name of common-sense and self-defense he doesn't do it to an extent far beyond any present practice, is one of the mysteries of our incomprehensive human nature.

He can, if he will live on an 80 sou basis, while the non-farmer is compelled to live on a 12 franc basis. He has the cool end of the poker, every time.

While he is thinking of his many troubles, he might enlarge his smile a little by thinking also of this advantage.

THE FARMER.